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SEIZING THE ADVANTAGE, SEIZING THE INITIATIVE - NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

BY MAJOR GENERAL J P KISZELY MC

'There was no time to put on the discarded breastplate. He leapt on the horse, shouted to his men, and charged...and the Royalist force, unorganised and in disarray, galloped sword in hand against the enemy...It was unpremeditated, wildly impetuous, and wholly successful.'¹

Prince Rupert of the Rhine at the Battle of Powick Bridge in 1642 offers us an inspiring example of a military commander seizing the advantage. Seizing the advantage is all about exploiting opportunities and, some would argue, is about as fundamental to success as it is possible to get, not just in military affairs but in the activities of every form of life on this planet. Those organisations which succeed in comparison to their competitors generally do so because they have succeeded in better exploiting opportunities. But Powick Bridge is a forgotten battle, partly because it was a small affair, but more importantly because it was inconsequential. Prince Rupert's spectacular seizure of the advantage did not lead to a Royalist seizure of the initiative. This article looks at the relationship between the advantage and the initiative, analysing the factors which contribute to seizing and holding the initiative in military operations, and looks ahead to the operations of the future to assess the scope they may provide for seizure of the initiative - both for us and for our opponents.

Seizing the advantage means exploiting an opportunity to get into a better position in respect of circumstances or of an opponent. It results from individual initiative - the ability of an individual to initiate appropriate action. At its simplest, the better position may be an end in itself - for example, the removal of a threat - or it may be a means to facilitate the exploitation of further opportunities. And in a two-sided contest such as warfare, the

ability consistently to seize the advantage may lead to a much prized goal: seizing and holding the initiative - that is to say, the ability to control the course of events.

Many historians would probably agree with the view of the former commander of the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command, General Donn Starry, that

'By far the majority of winners in battles in which the beginning force ratios were generally within 'reasonable' limits...(say one against six, or six against one)...were those who somehow seized the initiative from the enemy, and held it to, the battle's end... This seems to be true whether defending or attacking, outnumbered or outnumbering.'²

On the face of it, therefore, seizing and holding the initiative might be considered to be a principle for the achievement of success in warfare. It is strange, therefore, that the initiative is not listed among the British or US armed forces' hallowed Principles of War. Firstly, though, what contributes to achievement of the initiative?

KEYS TO THE INITIATIVE

There are perhaps five key contributory factors to seizing and holding the initiative. The first is the requirement for a commander to be able to spot



Seizing the advantage is about exploiting opportunities and may be decisive in a battle against the enemy. Major General Kiszely analyses the key factors involved in seizing and holding the initiative, arguing that understanding the initiative is key to success on the battlefield.

opportunities and, if necessary, to create the favourable circumstances which will generate opportunities. The ability to create favourable circumstances has been the trademark of many successful commanders, usually because they recognised the sort of battle which would play best to their strengths and to their enemy's weaknesses, and succeeded in imposing that battle on their enemy. Thus, Rommel, master of manoeuvre, who had honed his force into a tool ideally suited to a battle of manoeuvre, imposed on his opponents the chaotic, uncertain, fast-moving battle in which he excelled - dragging his opponents into the arena of his choosing; in the words of his biographer, David Fraser,

'...believing that the menace posed to the enemy by the depth and impetus of his thrust would, somewhere, somehow, force a reaction whose exact nature none could foresee; and that in the consequent unpredictable fighting his own swiftness of action and the training of his troops would bring victory.'³

By contrast, Montgomery, master of the set-piece, who held a considerable materiel superiority but whose troops were inferior in training and manoeuvre skills, refused to be drawn into Rommel's arena and succeeded in imposing on him a



Rommel: master of coup d'oeil. (Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum)

more static battle of attrition. Where his predecessors had inadvertently fallen into the trap by responding to Rommel's moves, Montgomery ensured that this did not happen. His oft-repeated dictum emphasised this.

'We must make the enemy dance to our tune throughout...Never react to enemy moves or thrusts...once you have to react to the enemy thrusts you will begin to dance to the enemy's tune, and once this happens you are done.'⁴

Both Montgomery and Rommel possessed the ability to recognise advantageous circumstances as such, although Rommel's gift was perhaps more that of *coup d'oeil* - taking things in at a glance. Clausewitz defined *coup d'oeil* as '...the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection...',⁵ and he goes on to allude to the part intuition plays: '...(coup d'oeil) refers not alone to the physical but, more commonly, to the inward eye.' Clausewitz also emphasises that *coup d'oeil* is a requirement not just on the battlefield but also at the strategic level '...since here as well quick decisions are often needed'.⁶

Secondly, the commander needs to have the will and means to exploit an opportunity. Some nations have placed greater emphasis on this requirement than others. In the years immediately preceding the Second World War, great emphasis was placed in German doctrine on the exploitation of opportunities and on the individual initiative which would achieve it.

'The emptiness of the battlefield demands independently thinking and acting fighters who exploit each situation in a considered, determined and bold way. They must be thoroughly conscious that only results matter...This decisive action remains the first pre-requisite of success in war...Everybody, from the highest commander to the youngest soldier must be conscious of the fact that inactivity and lost opportunities weigh heavier than do errors in the choice of means.'⁷

Perhaps more surprisingly, given some likely preconceptions, this spirit was reflected in contemporary Soviet doctrine:

'The exercise of individual initiative by subordinate commanders with a sudden change of the situation is of enormous importance. The com-

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mander should encourage every sensible initiative taken by his subordinates in all possible ways, exploiting it in furtherance of the overall aim of the battle. ‘Sensible initiative’ is based on an understanding of the superior commander’s intention, on a striving to find the best means of furthering this intention, likewise on exploiting every favourable turn of a rapidly changing situation.’⁸

A similar requirement for individual initiative on the battlefield was identified from within both armies. For the German Army, ‘Waiting for news in a difficult situation is a bad error.’ For the Soviet Army, ‘The cry of ‘I’m waiting for orders’⁹ which really meant ‘I’m doing nothing’ was the real scourge of our activities in the field.’¹⁰

But contemporary British doctrine did not feature such emphasis on individual initiative. In the British case this resulted, at least in part, from the expectation of the nature of future conflict and of the perceived paths to success in it. Montgomery was not alone in drawing from the First World War the lesson that battles must in future be meticulously planned and tightly controlled – in his words ‘teed-up’. But this emphasis came at a price. As Corelli Barnett has observed,

‘The British Army was good at the rigidly controlled, elaborately organised, set-piece attack in which all its commanders believed. There was therefore a rigidity, an emphasis on hierarchy and strict control from the top which tended to inhibit initiative and swift exploitation.’¹¹



The Basra Road 1991: ‘Avoidance of enemy casualties.... will assure a much greater importance than it has in the past.’ (Photo: Crown Copyright)

For Montgomery, this was probably a price worth paying. As noted earlier, his set-piece battles, avoiding response to the enemy’s thrusts, placed little premium on individual initiative; the recipe for success was seizing the initiative - ‘making the enemy dance to our tune throughout’ - by strict adherence to what he called his ‘master plan’. But it resulted in less emphasis being placed in the British Army on individual initiative as a military virtue. Moreover, as has been noted elsewhere,¹² there was also an inherent reluctance to take advantage of an opponent’s ill fortune, as if doing so contravened some code of chivalry. There may be more than a grain of truth in Richard Simpkin’s observation that the exploitation of success was ‘...something that the Anglo-Saxon military mind is still apt to see as one stage more ungentlemanly even than the achievement of success.’¹³

But with the *will*, the commander must also have the *means* at his disposal to exploit opportunities. No amount of determination will suffice if the physical means – the weapon systems, platforms, command and control, doctrine and trained troops – are not available.

Thirdly, a key to seizing and holding the initiative is offensive action. Clearly, such action is likely to be an important first step in getting our enemy to react to us rather than retaining the flexibility to act in a time and manner of his choosing. On the battlefield this action will often need to be offensive in a very literal, violent sense. But it will be important to keep the aim in mind; on occasions, offensive action conducted for its own sake will be counter-productive - risking ‘dancing to the enemy’s tune’, as Montgomery recognised. In operations other than war, and in the non-military lines of operation such as political and economic, offensive action – albeit in a less literal sense – will also be an important contributor to seizing and retaining the initiative. But here again, offensive action will not always lead to the initiative; gratuitously offensive action risks handing the initiative to our opponent, as we have sometimes discovered to our cost. The requirement is perhaps well expressed in the words of the Czech writer, F O Miksche,¹⁴ ‘...to prevent the enemy from snatching back the initiative...he must be continually confronted with *fais accomplis*.’¹⁵ Although current British armed forces and US army doctrines stress the vital link between offensive action and the initiative,¹⁶ they list as a Principle of War offensive action (or in the US case, the ‘offensive’), rather than initiative, arguably overemphasising the former at the expense of the latter.¹⁷

The fourth means of seizing and holding the initiative is through high tempo - that is to say, having a higher rhythm or rate of activity than your opponent. The ability to mount an operation faster than the enemy, to carry out that operation and be ready to start the next one faster than the enemy, or to be able to transition from one activity to another faster, is often critical to achievement of the initiative. Hence the emphasis on speed of decision and action – the Observe-Orientate-Decide-Act cycle (or ‘OODA loop’), and on the training and equipment required throughout an organisation to achieve it.¹⁸ Tempo is not a purely military concept – the advantages of a political decision-making process which is consistently faster than an opponent’s is obvious - but tempo deserves particular emphasis in military operations because inherent in warfare is an element which acts as a drag on tempo – what Clausewitz called friction:

‘...(the) countless small incidents – the kind you can never foresee - (which) combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal.’¹⁹

Lastly, a key to seizing and holding the initiative is manoeuvre - seeking to get into a position of advantage in respect of the enemy from which force can be threatened or applied²⁰ - in other words, seizing the advantage. To his assertion that the majority of victories were attributable to the seizing and holding of the initiative, General Starry added, ‘Most often the initiative was successfully seized and held by manoeuvre.’ In many instances manoeuvre will involve physical movement – indeed, Guderian famously asserted that ‘Only movement brings victory’²¹ - but the manoeuvre required, in both warfighting and operations other than war, is more in the sense of placing the enemy in a position of disadvantage, emphasising an approach which is continually seeking to outmanoeuvre him *mentally* - and this is the essence of what is referred to as the manoeuvrist approach, now a central tenet of British defence doctrine, where:

‘Emphasis is on the defeat and disruption of the enemy - by taking the initiative, and applying constant and unacceptable pressure at the times and places the enemy least expects ...’²²

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Having analysed the key requirements for seizing the initiative, what opportunities and challenges for the exercise of the initiative are likely to result from the circumstances in which our armed forces may find themselves operating over the next few years? At the outset it is worth noting two things. First, any change in circumstances results, almost by definition, in opportunity; if we agree that we are in a period of huge, arguably unprecedented, change, then we are in a period of huge, arguably unprecedented, opportunity, both for ourselves and for any opponent - hence the scope, also, for challenge. Secondly, we need to be clear that achievement of the initiative is far from being a foregone conclusion. There will be some operations where the favourable circumstances necessary for it do not exist and simply cannot be created. Those are the operations in which we should *not* be involved. Indeed, a good test of whether or not we should involve ourselves in a potential operation is whether or not we believe we can seize and hold the initiative.

Looking ahead, it is probably safe to say that the vast majority of operations in which the UK’s armed forces will be involved in the near future are likely to be interventionist in nature - that is to say deploying to areas of crises to intervene, with varying mandates and varying degrees of force from peacekeeping to warfare. Having identified manoeuvre and tempo among our key requirements for seizing the initiative, we will need the ability to deploy quickly to pre-empt escalation and to achieve surprise. And having arrived there, we will increasingly be looking for high tempo operations and, where possible, for fast and highly manoeuvrable platforms from which to operate. And because future operations may lie anywhere on the spectrum of conflict from peacekeeping to warfighting, and since we cannot afford a full suite of equipment bespoke for every contingency, we will be looking for equipment that has wide utility. The US Army is already heading down this path with vigour - highlighting disparities with other nations in funding and interoperability.

An increasing proportion of these deployments is also likely to be for peace support operations rather than warfighting. Each is likely to be unique in character and circumstances, and to demand a unique approach to seizing and holding the initiative.

At the outset of such operations, individual initiative plays an important part in achieving this, as old doctrine attempts to catch up with new circumstances. But equally, the longer the duration, the more likely individual initiative is to be sidelined in favour of a series of centrally imposed drills, epitomised by the proliferation of coloured cards specifying the action required for every conceivable circumstance. Dull though this may be for participants, it is probably a sensible way of lessening the chances of the strategic level initiative being suddenly lost, particularly in high profile campaigns, as a result of a piece of misguided individual initiative at the tactical level. It is also probably true that the more coloured cards soldiers have in their pockets, the more they are in need of training, such as adventurous training, designed to encourage individual initiative not least in preparation for the next deployment.

It is also clear that in future we will rely as much as possible on technological overmatch over opponents, just as we have done in recent operations as diverse as the Gulf war, the NATO operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the UN mission in East Timor. We will be looking for information superiority, real-time intelligence and radically improved situational awareness, coupled to a similar overmatch in both firepower and manoeuvre, particularly in the precision munitions which exploit the surveillance and target-acquisition advantage. But none of these things come cheaply, and hard decisions will be required on prioritisation. To what extent do we already have such technological overmatch? In the 1999 Kosovo campaign, according to US Defence Secretary William S Cohen,

‘A vast number of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems allowed for the rapid collection and collating into a single system the vital battlefield intelligence that we sent to the shooters. Taken together, all these innovations allowed our pilots to hit any target, any time, day or night, in any weather, accurate to within a few feet.’²³

This statement deserves examination. Few would deny that a vast number of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems were used, or that they collected and collated into a single system some vital battlefield intelligence which was sent to the ‘shooters’. Nor is it in doubt that, on occasions, pilots hit their desired targets at all

times of day and night, and in a wide variety of weather conditions, and were accurate to within a few feet. But open source material suggests that the ‘shooters’ did not receive *all* the vital battlefield intelligence, nor could they *guarantee* to hit within a few feet of any target, even in ideal conditions. Nor should anyone have expected them to do so since, invariably, technology fails to deliver all that it promises.

It is also clear that, in future, avoidance of casualties - our own casualties, civilian casualties and, where possible, enemy casualties - will assume a much greater importance than it has in the past. Holding the initiative within such a constraint will probably require command of the air and sea, fighting the enemy at long range wherever possible and, if necessary, the expenditure of large amounts of ammunition (and, thereby, large sums of money) to wear down enemy materiel and morale - an attritional approach. Related to casualty avoidance and avoidance of collateral damage will be an increasing emphasis on international law and on our own Rules of Engagement (ROE). This will require the ability to match the destructive power of our offensive action to ROE constraints; weapons or munitions of huge destructive power become unusable when an operation moves from, say, warfighting to peace enforcement. Moreover, some munitions previously considered acceptable - for example, bomblets - may in future be deemed unacceptable; the same may become the case with targets, such as power stations and telecommunications infrastructure. All of this places limits on offensive action, identified as a key element of seizing the initiative, and ingenuity will be required to ‘keep presenting the enemy with *fait accomplis*.’ This could, however, lead to investment in other means of achieving our aim. The view of General Wesley Clark, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe at the time of the Kosovo campaign, was reportedly that

‘NATO could have used legal means to block the Danube and Adriatic ports, and could have used ‘methods to isolate Milosevic and his political parties electronically’. If implemented and augmented with other means, Clark added, the military instrument might never have been used.’²⁴

The prospect of defeating our enemies by isolating them electronically - of preventing them from exercising command and control - is a welcome one, and one that would certainly be in the

spirit of Sun Tzu's dictum, '...to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.'²⁵ Sceptics, however, might be forgiven for asking to see the small print of exactly how this is to be achieved in practice. General Clark's remark begs a further question. If Yugoslavia, with a relatively undeveloped and simple electronic infrastructure, was vulnerable to what is known as information warfare, will such a capability prove to be more of a challenge than an opportunity to Western democracies with their dependence on highly sophisticated and complex electronic infrastructure? The 'I Love You' virus demonstrated our vulnerability to computer network attack. Will technology lead to better defences against such an attack in future, or will its advance merely lead to greater vulnerability? An opponent who times his computer attack carefully could negate our conventional military superiority and seize the initiative at a critical moment in a crisis or conflict.

Asymmetric warfare - where an opponent focuses, like the 'I Love You' hacker on attacking our vulnerabilities - is likely to increase, not least because it is no more than common sense for our opponents. It is, therefore, one of the areas of greatest challenge to our security. We can certainly expect asymmetric campaigns such as narco-terrorism, and asymmetric responses in our deployed operations, and should not be surprised if this places considerable constraints on the applicability of conventional military power. Seizing the initiative back from asymmetric attack will undoubtedly present a challenge and will require considerable imagination and flexibility of mind.

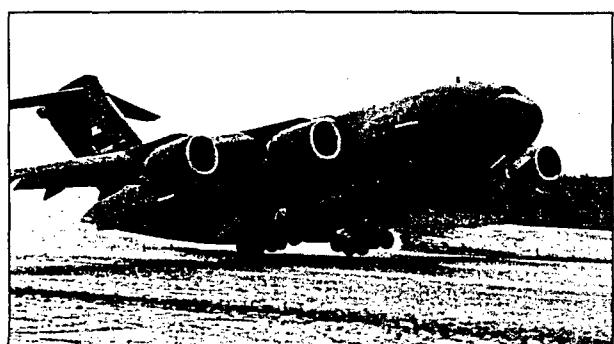
Future operations are also likely to become increasingly complex, and the resulting requirement for greater co-ordination and synchronisation may well act to inhibit individual initiative, in turn constraining our ability to seize and hold the initiative. Not that this is new. In 1944 US Army troops seized intact the critical prize of a bridge over the Rhine at Remagen. But when General Bradley phoned General Eisenhower's headquarters with the news and his intention to exploit, he was told by General Eisenhower's Operations Chief, 'You're not going anywhere down there at Remagen; it just doesn't fit in with the plan.'²⁶ The decision was, happily, subsequently reversed by Eisenhower. Even with a more flexible command outlook there are structural pressures which may prove insuperable. The daily air tasking order in

the Gulf War ran to many hundreds of serials and specified flight details for every sortie at least 48 hours, sometimes 72 hours, ahead. This led to a requirement for a huge and complex synchronisation matrix on which almost every military activity down to unit level in all services from all nations was specified by the Commander-in-Chief's staff. This allowed little latitude in time and space for activity to be adjusted, for example to take advantage of a sudden opportunity. The Master Plan ruled, much as it had for Montgomery, albeit for different reasons.

There is also likely to be pressure for future operations to be low risk. Unsurprisingly and understandably, politicians will tend to prefer solutions which minimise the stakes and casualties, to be wary of high risk/high gain proposals, to pursue a ceaseless (if usually fruitless) quest for certainty, and to seek to keep close control on operations even at the tactical level. This, however, is likely to constrain individual initiative, not least in preventing on-the-spot exploitation of fleeting opportunities. There is nothing new in this. As early as the 4th century BC, Sun Tzu found it necessary to sound a note of warning:

'To put a rein on an able general while at the same time asking him to suppress a cunning enemy is like tying up the Black Hound of Han and then ordering him to chase elusive hares.'²⁷

And the preference for tightly controlled, low risk operations is also likely to lead to solutions relying on materiel superiority and the gradual wearing down of enemy capability - that is to say, attrition warfare. In some circumstances this may be appropriate; in some circumstances it will not. The further danger here is that this tendency may, in turn, breed an attritional mentality rather than an entrepreneurial one based on seizing the advantage at every opportunity.



*C17: Seizing the initiative through rapid deployment.
(Photo: USAF)*

A further factor which could stifle individual initiative in the armed forces is the increasingly litigious nature of society – in particular, the perceived need to apportion blame and seek compensation in the event of personal injury or death. Since both the latter are inherent in warfare, military operations are a particularly fruitful area for those who perceive this need, and for those who profit by it. We have already seen attempts to prosecute military commanders in the wake of incidents on the battlefield - and, indeed, on training - resulting in death or injury, and this trend is highly likely to increase in future. Unsurprisingly, commanders may bear this in mind when making decisions, and may become less enthusiastic than in the past to take the initiative and shoulder the resulting responsibility. They are certainly less likely to favour high risk/high gain courses of action since these will have added to them the risk of a custodial sentence and bankruptcy. The fact that the high risk/high gain course of action might have saved lives or secured victory, and that the decision was made on necessarily incomplete information, against the clock and in circumstances of chaos and danger may count for little in the calm of the court and before people with little or no understanding of the pressures of command on the battlefield. Neither the military nor society should underestimate the insidious effect of this on battlefield effectiveness, nor the degree of moral courage which commanders will require to overcome it.

Lastly, the vast majority of our future operations are likely to be as part of a multinational coalition or alliance, and to involve civilian agencies. Such operations will require us to work much harder to be able to seize and hold the initiative. Achieving high tempo will be particularly challenging, not least because of the requirement for changes of plan to be referred back to capitals, but also the need to improve inter-operability and connectivity in hardware, software, language, doctrine and training. Unless a coalition achieves a high degree of cohesion it will find it hard to seize and retain the initiative against a single nation opponent.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, seizing and holding the initiative - the ability to control the course of events - is a principle for the achievement of success in military operations. It is achieved by a commander's ability to create favourable circumstances and to spot and exploit opportunities, by the skilful use of offen-

sive action and high tempo, and by manoeuvre - seizing the advantage. The nature of future operations - multinational, interventionist, high technology, asymmetric, centralised control, and low risk - is likely to offer a wide variety of opportunities to seize and hold the initiative - opportunities for both ourselves and our opponents. With these opportunities come challenges, perhaps the greatest of which is affordability. But our ability to make the most of the opportunities will depend, not least, on an understanding of the nature of initiative itself. □

NOTES

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16. *British Defence Doctrine*, JWP 0-01, (HMSO, 1996), pp. A.4-5; and US Army publication FM 100-5, (Dept of The Army, 1993), Ch 2, p.2-4.
17. The 1920 Principles of War (*Field Standard Regulations*, Volume 2, p.14) lists Offensive action, Principles of Training 1917 lists The Offensive Spirit. See J Alger, *The Quest For Victory*, (Greenwood Press, 1982), p.235. In an attritional culture the offensive spirit has an altogether more fundamental role than has initiative.
18. See J P Kiszely, 'Achieving High Tempo - New Challenges', *RUSI Journal*, Vol.144 No.6, December 1999.
19. C von Clausewitz, *op cit*, pp 119-120.
20. *British Defence Doctrine*, p.G.8.
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22. *British Defence Doctrine*, p.4.8.
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